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The Hybrid Influences of *Strangeland*
Talking Horror, Mythology, Game Design and Aesthetics with Writer and Game Developer Mark Yohalem and Artist Victor Pflug

Jeffery Klaehn

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FEATURE INTERVIEW

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Talking Horror, Mythology, Game Design and Aesthetics

with Writer and Game Developer Mark Yohalem and Artist Victor Pflug

Jeffery Klaehn

This article presents an interview with writer and game developer Mark Yohalem (b. 1980) discussing horror and mythology in relation to *Strangeland,* a psychological horror game released in 2021 from Wormwood Studios in which players explore the haunted mindscape of a man consumed by self-loathing and grief. Thematic, aesthetic, cultural and production-related frameworks are explored, in addition to the topic of games and metacognition. Mythology, as well as works by Ray Bradbury, Francisco Goya, and Franz von Stuck are discussed, all within the context of the macabre. The article then presents an interview with artist Victor Pflug (b. 1982) who cites the 1967 British television series *The Prisoner* as an influence on his work for *Strangeland* and shares his thoughts and reflections on *Strangeland'*s art and sound design, *Twin Peaks*, H.R. Giger and other horror and dark fantasy inspirations and influences. The article concludes with a discussion with Mark Yohalem about *Strangeland,* horror and games within the context of perceptions and empathy.

I. Talking *Strangeland,* Mythology, Art and Horror with Mark Yohalem

Introduction

Mark Yohalem co-founded Wormwood Studios with two friends, artist Victor Pflug and programmer James Spanos. In 2012, they released *Primordia*, which has sold over a quarter-million copies and was, for years, the highest-rated adventure game on Steam. In 2021 they released *Strangeland,* a psychological horror game in which players explore the haunted mindscape of a man consumed by self-loathing and grief. In addition to his own projects, Mark has worked as a senior writer/designer for Bioware, inXile Entertainment, TimeGate Studios, and other companies. By day, he is a lawyer, and was rated

one of the Top 40 Attorneys Under 40 in California. This interview was conducted via Google Docs in June 2021.

JEFFERY KLAEHN: Please tell me about *Strangeland*.

MARK YOHALEM: *Strangeland* is a horror adventure game. Unlike *Primordia*, which presents a fairly traditional hero's journey, *Strangeland* is an inward-looking story in which you explore someone's memories and feelings through the surreal, nightmarish carnival that is his grieving mind. En route to self-awareness, the player will need to conjure the spirits of the dead, feed a ten-legged teratoma, ride a cicada into the abyss, bring a hideous Feejee Mermaid her name, and do battle with a massive crab made of black lightning. You know, the usual Tuesday.

JK: How did you approach theme, story, and gameplay elements, with a view toward players and how they experience the game?

Mark Yohalem: We began with horror. Horror is an incredibly powerful genre for shaking us from our conventional moorings and sweeping us into dark, deep waters that we would rather not think about. *Strangeland* uses the dislocation of horror to open the player up to themes of loss, love, loneliness, self-doubt (even self-loathing), and redemption. These are universal feelings, but the game takes you on a surreal journey through a very particular and personal manifestation of them.

JK: Can you elaborate on what you mean by "universal" versus "particular"?

Mark Yohalem: For instance, I think everyone knows the feeling of groping through the darkness, only to have a moment of lucidity in which bright new vistas open to us and we are transformed by joy. (Quite often in horror this might come from bursting out of a tunnel into the light of day, or making it through a harrowing night and seeing the dawn break over the horizon.) The use of a *cicada* as a metaphor for that moment, however, is particular and comes from my own childhood experience with the 17-year cyclical Brood X, now conveniently resurging.

Likewise, everyone has felt that kind of powerlessness when you know exactly where you need to go, but somehow can't get in (or get out). In nightmares, this

often takes the form of sleep paralysis. *Strangeland* uses the more idiosyncratic metaphor of needing to cut your way into a circus tent but only having a dull knife that can't slash the canvas.

For a final example, everyone hears the voice of self-doubt in his or her head from time to time, but the specific words used by the *Strangeland* antagonist who calls you on the phone are particular to what I have heard (over and over again) in my own head.

So when we say that these feelings are universal, we don't mean that the yearning the Stranger [*Strangeland*'s self-hating protagonist] feels for the Woman [an image of his lost love] represents how everyone experiences loving, being loved, losing, and being lost. What we mean is that all of us have lights in our lives that help us through the darkness, and when those lights go out, we all can fall into terrible pits of despair and horror. Our *particular* story about grief and redemption will, I hope, connect with others (with their own particular stories) and help them feel less alone.

JK: Empathy and connection?

Mark Yohalem: Every game connects with players somehow. With *Strangeland*, I wanted to forge a kinship of hope in the face of horror and despair, precisely because such kinship would give *me* hope in the face of horror and despair. *Strangeland* is autobiographical in various ways (not the specific loss it involves, though), and I wanted to say: "This is my darkness; this is my light; and this is the peace I hope I would ultimately find if I thought that light had gone out." When players find a connection with that message, it affirms my own hope.

JK: The game includes commentary and annotation features. Why was it important for you to include this information within the game, to make it available for players?

Mark Yohalem: The game is about exploring a disturbed psyche that has been imprinted with certain patterns, images, and metaphors. That psyche is basically mine (at least as far as the narrative goes, Vic mixed his own psyche with the audiovisual elements). There's no reason why any particular player would share my specific interests in Goya, Shakespeare, [the fantasy video game] *Planescape: Torment* [1999], my great-aunt's poetry, *Being John Malkovich* [1999], T.S. Eliot, *The Great Dictator* [1940, Charles Chaplin], Norse mythology, etymology,

Ecclesiastes, Bradburian carnivals, deranged starfish… etc. So I thought it would be nice to provide annotations for the myriad references from which the game is woven. Dante got Virgil as his tour guide through hell; sadly, the best we can offer as your tour guide through the hellscape of our team's darkest thoughts are our own annotations and comments.

JK: For those reading this who may have yet to play the game, can you give one or two examples from the commentary on how elements of the game converge with horror?

Mark Yohalem: For instance, while there is nothing incongruous about a Feejee Mermaid (Figures 1 and 2) in a carnival, there's a commentary track that explains how her particular body horror fits within the game's larger themes. When I was a boy, we visited the father of a friend who had been afflicted by leukemia, underwent drastic chemotherapy, suffered a stroke, and lost his marriage in the midst of this. He had been my baseball coach, and our two families spent a lot of time together. But cancer and its treatment had robbed him of his strength and clarity of thought, the stroke had impaired his ability to eat and speak, the chemotherapy had taken all of his hair (including his eyebrows), and the agony and despair and rage had destroyed his marriage. Nothing could be more terrifying: an evil that is *lurking in your bones*, strong enough to

Figure 1: The Feejee Mermaid as envisioned by P.T. Barnum

Figure 2: The Feejee Mermaid as incarnated in *Strangeland*

dehumanize and destroy the ultimate totem of strength and stability for a child (a father, a coach, etc.).

Another experience I talk about is a moonless night when a friend of mine and I stayed out too late and then tried to take a shortcut home, only to find ourselves hounded by a huge stray dog, and how I used that memory and the metaphor of the black dog of depression to create one of the adversaries you face in the game.

JK: On the achievements of artist Victor Pflug and programmer James Spanos with *Strangeland?*

Mark Yohalem: Inestimable. They say a picture is worth a thousand words; but no words, at least none of mine, could do what Vic's visuals do in a game. Nor can my words do justice to his work here. But it is important to understand that Vic's *audio* work was just as important. Much of the sense of dread, the sense of *space* (sometimes vast, sometimes cramped), the sense of disgust in the game comes from the soundscape, which is astonishing.

And none of this, *none of it*, could have been done without Jim [Spanos]. On a technical level, he achieved things with our engine that no one believed it could do, things that not only made possible Vic's audio and visual brilliance, but also permitted narrative techniques (like the montage sequences) that couldn't be done in *Primordia*. And Jim wasn't just a technowizard. At various times in the project, each of us became a leader, but I would say that Jim became a leader when one was needed most. Finally, he contributed the music in the "good" ending, without which that scene would have much less impact.

JK: Please tell me about the game's influences.

Mark Yohalem: It is nothing *but* influences, but I can rattle off some of the primary ones. From books, I would say [Ray] Bradbury (in particular "The Dwarf" — a very tender, very terrifying story [originally published in 1955 in *The October Country*] that strikes an open nerve for anyone who was ever an ashamed outsider) and [Mervyn] Peake (the very first sentence I wrote about the game was that it should be "Gormenghastian," by which I meant that there should be this gothic setting that is a character of its own). From classic literature, *The Divine Comedy*, Ecclesiastes, and Snorri Sturluson's Norse mythological works. From art, I would say Goya (in particular *Los caprichos* and

his more famous painting "Saturn Devouring His Son") and Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (you know, the short film where the eye gets cut open). From poetry, T.S. Elliot's "Hollow Men," Poe's "The Raven," and the works of my own great aunt, Virginia Hardman. From games, probably *Planescape: Torment* and *Psychonauts* (2005) though many players compare *Strangeland* to *Sanitarium* (1998),which is fair enough. From movies, *Being John Malkovich* and *Dark City* (1998).

Figure 3: *Strangeland*

JK: What "horror" was most influential for you, growing up?

Mark Yohalem: Honestly? *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* [Alvin Schwartz, 1981; illustrated by Stephen Gammell]. Man, there was a lot of very dark stuff in that, macabre, unsettling—a sense of the grotesque seething just beneath the skin of the world. Turn the wrong corner, pick the wrong scab, pet the wrong dog, look the wrong way, anything awful could happen. Would happen. But also, when I was too young, I saw an episode of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* TV show (*Freddy's Nightmares* [1988-90]), and that left me shaken for months. Some kinds of horror just plant a seed in the fertile soil of a child's imagination, and from there it grows. It doesn't even need to be a good seed. By the time you're older, it's harder to have the same impact, no matter how good the seed.

JK: Your thoughts on the contemporary relevance of Goya, mythology, and Ray Bradbury?

Mark Yohalem: It seems like Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son" became kind of a meme at some point, so I guess he has some contemporary relevance in that sense. That painting is certainly one of his most powerful (as I mention in the commentary tracks, it is incredible to think it was a mural in Goya's breakfast room or whatever), but I don't particularly like its meme-ification, which somehow reduces a heart-wrenching image of a shameless, omnipotent deity caught in a look of shame and weakness. Goya's works as a whole highlight the grotesqueness all around us—things we get desensitized or willfully blind to. He compels us to empathy even while he compels us to revulsion. At some age, everyone should at least flip through *Los caprichos*.

Turning to Norse mythology (the primary mythology referenced in the game, though the Greeks get some air time), thanks to Marvel movies, video games, and Neil Gaiman, it is more popular than ever—probably more popular, by head-count, than it was when those myths formed the religion of an entire region. I'm not sure this popularized version captures everything in the source material, but popularization never hurts—those who want to learn more easily can. One scholar of Norse mythology said in a lecture I once listened to that the Norse gods were wise enough to see the end of the world, but not wise enough to know how to avert it. That seems more relevant than ever.

As for Bradbury, his relevance seems to have faded a bit (notwithstanding a lovely biography by Sam Weller published in the last decade)[1] since his passing. I think he still has a lot to teach us. Many of his stories struck a deep chord in me, regardless of the time of life in which I read them. In particular, "The Dwarf" [1955] speaks to that experience that I (and I think many outsiders) know very well, when your tormentors find your source of solace and turn it against you.

Despite his vast imagination and deep humanism, Bradbury's vision was limited by the time and place in which he lived, so aspects of his writing may not have "aged well." But I think the core of his writing is the lesson that there is decency and dignity even in those we might be inclined to dismiss as monstrous, and there can be monstrousness hiding behind decorum. The Bradbury of my mind

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[1] *The Bradbury Chronicles: The Life of Ray Bradbury* (Harper Perennial, 2006)

is like T.H. White's Merlin, and I love both those characters very much, even if neither is necessarily real. Like Merlin, this Bradbury of mine is timeless.

JK: Which aspects are you thinking of, in terms of Bradbury being of his time?

Mark Yohalem: Ultimately, what he wants to preserve in Greentown is the best of his own childhood. But I doubt that everyone would have experienced Greentown as an idyll. Bradbury was very progressive, but you can only see so far into the future, and our vision gets worse as we age.

JK: Your thoughts on understanding Goya's art as commentary on hopelessness, strife, pain and social-political conditions of life?

Mark Yohlem: I think Goya reminds us that the abuse of power deforms both the abuser and the abused, but he still manages to see the humanity in people even when we are deformed. I don't know if Goya's works are hopeful, per se, but by preserving the human even in his monsters, there is at least the suggestion that the monsters might preserve the capacity for redemption back to humane conduct. And he makes us see ourselves in these monsters, and recognize our own capacity for monstrousness.

JK: What are your thoughts on Franz von Stuck's "Lucifer" (1890) painting (Figure 4)?

Mark Yohalem: Those eyes! As Milton wrote, "All is not lost; the unconquerable will / And study of revenge, immortal hate, / And courage never to submit or yield: / And what is else not to be overcome?"

Figure 4: *Lucifer* (1890), Franz von Stuck

JK: Your thoughts on von Stuck's "Medusa" (1892) painting (Figure 5)?

Figure 5: *Medusa* (1892), Franz von Stuck

Mark Yohalem: It surely is the moment of Medusa locking eyes with Theseus via his shield, no? Look at the horror in her eyes, the gasp escaping her lips. She realizes that someone has figured it out. The game is up. Compare von Stuck's Medusa to Böcklin's; the exact same idea, but Böcklin's is saggy, gaping; a face that could neither give nor perceive horror. Von Stuck's is dynamic, horrific.

The Medusa myth makes a small appearance in *Strangeland*. What can we take from the fact that Theseus can look at her reflection and not die? That a reflection doesn't show us everything. Medusa likewise can look at her own reflection (the video game-y mirror-to-kill Medusa trope makes no sense); but she can never see herself through another's eyes. She has no sense of how she is perceived. Early myths made her wholly monstrous; later myths suggested she was beautiful; but either way, Medusa couldn't know. But then in that fateful fight with Theseus, they meet eyes in the mirror. She sees his fear and fearful determination to kill her. She gasps. The sword swings.

We could do a whole interview on how it is that Pegasus wriggles himself from her severed neck as if it were a birth canal, but it seems to me that this winged white wonder emerging from a monster's ruptured flesh surely must have had

its genesis in the life cycle of the cicada, a life cycle the Greeks took very seriously.

JK: What do you feel are some of the most frightening stories or horrific ideas from mythology? The story of Orpheus and Eurydice would be on my list. Sisyphus also. I feel that myth can be read as a parable about inequalities, including but not limited to class, race and gender, still so relevant now, to contemporary society, as they have been experienced and felt throughout history.

Mark Yohalem: Prometheus. He is the one genuine good guy of Greek mythology, and he winds up in an exquisite torture, rivaled only by Loki's fate in the Norse mythos.

Also, the small story of Demophon, the baby who Demeter, when mourning the loss of her daughter to Hades, tries to make immortal by putting him in a fire. The goddess is disguised as an old woman hired as a nursemaid. Demophon's mother catches Demeter and thinks she's trying to kill the baby, so she stops the ritual, and Demeter is enraged. In some versions, the baby then burns alive, in others, Demophon lives on as a hero but ultimately falls, undone by the bungling of his immortalization. Either way, the story has such a strange, uncertain moral—in effect, that a parent's instinctive desire to protect a child can prove the child's undoing. But the circumstances are so extreme that the moral seems to be, "You will never know whether what you are doing will save your child or doom it. Good luck."

JK: In contrast to horrific themes of futility, absurdity, suffering, and powerlessness, fate, what about agency, heroism, happiness, empowerment or beauty? What's the first image or metaphor that perhaps comes to mind for you that inspires feelings of joy, or serenity, when thinking of mythology?

Mark Yohalem: Athena. Of all the mythological gods, is there any other you would rather have proud of you? There are a thousand moments in the myths where Athena is remarkable, but the most remarkable to me comes at the end of the *Odyssey*. Athena watches to see if Odysseus still wants the woman who has waited for him all these long years. Remember, Calypso has already baited him with the fact that she, a nymph, is far comelier than the old wife waiting back home. And unlike the unbreakably faithful Penelope, Odysseus has a

roving eye (among other body parts). Odysseus passes the test. So what does Athena do? For that first night together, she lays a glamour on Odysseus, so he is again the man who Penelope was waiting for, the Odysseus of two decades past, not the seaworn, grizzled vagabond he has become. And she lays a glamour on Penelope, so she is again the wife that Odyseuss left behind. She permits them that night, one night, of rewinding time and slaking their physical yearning on their tree-rooted marital bed.

Athena. The Industrious. The Tireless. She Who Fights at the Front. Bright-Eyed. The inventor of the bridle and the wagon. Master weaver. Wise warrior. The shipwright. Patron of heroic endeavor. Symbol of democracy and learning. What more could you want? Amidst all the cruelty, rape, violence, pettiness, debauchery, and megalomania, there stands Athena with her aegis. The other Greek gods are, I guess, a reasonable projection of a human-like being who simply advanced up the mountain of power to a peak beyond the clouds—the Greeks knew plenty about tyrants and plutocrats and the like. But Athena seems not a projection or prediction of what an even-more-powerful tyrant would be; she is an idealization of what the powerful ought to aspire to.

Perhaps Athena would have liked adventure games, where you overcome your foes through outlandish cleverness, not brute force. Maybe she is proud of *Strangeland*, then.

II. Talking *Strangeland*'s Influences with Victor Pflug, from Surrealist Art to *The Prisoner* and *Twin Peaks*

Introduction

Victor Pflug is Wormwood Studios' lead concept artist and art director, and is an artist in numerous media, ranging from large-scale murals to ornate miniature metalworking, from portraiture to pixel art. In music, he is an accomplished circuit-bender and synth composer, as well as a hip-hop performer. In addition to *Primordia* and *Strangeland*, he has worked on numerous other games, some experimental and some traditional adventures. He cites the 1967 British television series *The Prisoner* as an influence on *Strangeland* and herein shares his thoughts and reflections on *Strangeland*'s art and sound design, and horror and dark fantasy influences—David Lynch and *Twin Peaks,* Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Brian Froud, and Swiss artist Hans Ruedi Giger among them.

Figure 6: *Strangeland*

JK: Please tell me about your contributions to *Strangeland*, and about how you approached your art for the game? Also please discuss any influences, anything you might like to touch upon and share.

VICTOR PFLUG [Vic]: *Strangeland,* unlike our first game *Primordia,* began solely as an idea of Mark's, so while I was for a large part painting a world he had initially conceived of, I thankfully got to call a lot of the shots conceptually. I also got to inject a lot of the surreality and macabre imagery I didn't get a chance to let loose in *Primordia,* which was very satisfying, even if my work in *Strangeland* did get censored from time to time, hehe.

Games like Cyberdream's *Dark Seed* (1992) and also titles like *Sanitarium* and *Weird Dreams* (1988) on C64 [Commodore 64] informed a lot of my artistic (and soundscape) decisions in *Strangeland.* From my end, I wanted to make a game like *Dark Seed,* but better. More atmospheric, darker, more disturbing. I really did set out visually and auditorily to create something that might become more than a sum of its parts, and really create a moody atmosphere of surreal gloom and forgotten mystery. But hopefully with an odd playfulness at times, too.

My approaches to the art and sound were very much like one would approach painting a landscape with oil paint. I began with very simple, rather drab daubs of landscape and soundscape in the first year or two of production, and then later on, once themes had become fully developed, I started to introduce some colour, and melody. That was definitely the fun part, the highlights; the vivid

purples and mauve clouds, the punchy reverberating drums and chittering sound glitches, that all got added later on in the process.

JK: With *Strangeland,* can you please share details on what was censored and why?

Vic: Oh I just grumble when Mark says my psycho-sexual imagery is too overt. So I used a lot of 19th century medical illustrations as reference for the vision scenes in *Strangeland.* Very, very, gruesome stuff, but beautiful, in a way, too. I think it was my image of crustaceans replacing a foetus in the image of a haphazard birth autopsy where he drew the line. I mean, fair enough. I snuck it into the credits though.

JK: What does surreal horror mean for you?

Vic: To me surreal horror means something, an image or a sound, perhaps a few words - that conjures up an instantaneous feeling of dread. The feeling that things are off kilter in the worst way possible. I've always been fascinated with the imagery of fear too ... . I like to think of it in terms of the origins of humankind. When the Earth was not all mapped out and catalogued. Where the dark *could* contain the unspeakable. The kind of primordial images of fear that tickle the same spots as those dark strange nights must have, in prehistory. I think we make horror because we miss that fear. We need it to help us grow.

JK: In what ways do you feel *The Prisoner* remains relevant still today?

Vic: *The Prisoner* remains an incredibly sophisticated, intriguing and succinctly put together as it was when it was made, in 1967. It was far, far ahead of its time then … I love how surreal and yet clever and grounded it is at the same time, much like *Twin Peaks* is, in my opinion. I feel like those two shows set a lot of the groundwork for modern television, but don't often get the recognition or inspirational research they deserve.

I fully admit to "borrowing" the basic concept of our Dark Thing from *The Prisoner*'s Rover design. Although to be fair, the Rover is just a large white balloon.

JK: What about horror and dark fantasy resonates with you, as a person and as an artist and creative?

Vic: David Lynch and specifically *Twin Peaks* I feel always resonated very much with me. I hope some of that bleeds over into my work. I think I love *Dark Seed II* simply because the author of that game was also a *Twin Peaks* fan. Brian Froud, Max Ernst and Giger have always been very big inspirations for me. Also Dali. Especially the late, great Josh Kirby, whom some of you may know as the original illustrator for the *Discworld* novels, but he also did some very dark and quite racy work too, like *Voyage of the Ayeguy* and his early fantasy novel cover art work.

JK: For those reading this who may be as of yet unfamiliar with the work of Brian Froud [e.g., *The Dark Crystal*], Max Ernst, and Josh Kirby, what draws you to their work? What do you find especially inspiring in terms of horror and the macabre?

Vic: I think one thing all these artists have in common, probably at least threefold, is unique vision, technical skills to back that up, and, first and foremost, I think, is world-building. Brian Froud's "Goblins" and "Faeries" books are not only incredible compendiums of fine watercolour illustration but also complete worlds unto themselves. Ernst's 'Une Semaine de Bonte' takes industrial age lithographs and splices bird and human, with a little BDSM thrown in for good measure, into a landscape of weirdness. Kirby's 'Voyage of the Ayeguy'stands alone. It's hard to describe - they say a picture is worth a thousand words, that's not true in Josh Kirby's case. His masterpiece space opera oil canvases have landscapes and denizens so wildly detailed and flamboyant, they speak volumes in every square inch.

JK: For you, what are some of the most disturbing elements of *Strangeland?*

Vic: To me, it's Mark's writing. Some of the cutscenes never fail to send shivers down my spine. I think my work on the game is creepy, but taken alone they're just macabre images. They can tell a story on their own but you have to look for it or be open to it. When Mark writes a scene, I'm just putting together the mechanics to make it happen usually, and the results I think are much more impressive than just one of my still pieces. I suppose that's why I got into game art over just painting in the first place though.

III. Conclusion: Talking Games, Emotion, Empathy and Horror with Mark Yohalem

JK: Did any other games influence *Strangeland?*

MARK YOHALEM: Too many to count. I'll never exorcise *Planescape: Torment*'s influence, or the influence of the many adventure games I've loved over the years.

JK: The word "love" appears in the Wormwood Studios "Credo" on the game's Steam page, in your post on the "Developer-Player Relationship," and in many of your responses to fans (see Yohalem, 2021). How does love fit with games? With horror?

Mark Yohalem: I think we tend to be overly careful about using the word "love"—popular culture has made it almost a taboo, such that, for instance, the moment a character uses the word in a movie is some watershed. As a consequence, too many people feel unloved, or underloved, and that produces a protective mechanism of becoming jaded, sarcastic, and closed-off, which feeds a vicious cycle.

I've been blessed by watching my daughters grow for over a decade. Children certainly seem to understand what love is; maybe the time we get the most love directed our way is when we are children, after all. And they express their love without reservation. They love us. They love each other. They love candy. They loved *Wild Kratts* and Legos until they loved *Harry Potter* and karate until they loved *Survivor* and soccer, etc., etc. They love animals. They love their friends. Colors. Places. And not for a minute did this unbridled expression of love cheapen their loving sentiments toward the things that "really matter." It's just, they let themselves love all sorts of things, and *admit* that love.

Of course, Corinthians teaches there is a time to stop thinking like a child and talking like a child, and that's true. But the same book tells us that *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. I don't cite this as a doctrine of faith, but as an expression of poetic wisdom that has stood the long test of time: we need to develop maturity, but grace lies in finding a way to do that without closing our hearts to love.

Games have an incredible capacity to evoke powerful feelings in players: thrills, fears, camaraderie, determination, etc. In making *Strangeland*, and in talking about it, I've tried to tie those feelings to deeper emotions that we sometimes are less comfortable talking about. Like I said earlier, one of the great things

about horror is that it can jolt us out of our normal comfort zone—horror is taboo-breaking. Here, the taboo is not against something unpleasant, but against something wonderful: opening your heart to others.

Figure 7: *Strangeland*

JK: I feel games can inspire players to think about different approaches and ways of progressing within games, can inspire thinking about potentiality, creative ways of resolving problems and even, more broadly, inspiring players to think in new ways, to learn, not strictly in terms of mechanics but also in relation to empathy, seeing and feeling, in response to art and narrative. And as a writer and game developer, what are your thoughts on the possibilities games offer in relation to other media, especially in relation to horror?

Mark Yohalem: As I wrote on *Strangeland*'s Steam page, I think horror is a guide and a light, maybe a kind of will-o-wisp that can lead us into the terrifying darkness inside of us, then help us emerge out of it with greater self-knowledge and even self-forgiveness. (I realize this is now, what, the third metaphor I've mixed into what horror is? The fourth?) Because the player in a game is always going on a journey, and becomes immersed in that journey, the *agent* of it and not merely the audience to it, this impact can be especially powerful. While I often found catharsis in shooting games like *Left 4 Dead* (2008), I think there is also capacity for games (particularly adventure games) to offer something more

to players—symbols and frameworks that can enhance our understanding of ourselves.

The relationship between horror (which can make us more emotionally open and unsettled) and gaming (where we can try on new roles and become immersed in them) creates the possibility for epiphanies. For instance, *Psychonauts* presents as a slapstick children's cartoon, but I think it's a sophisticated horror game about psychosis and pain, and it is hard to emerge from it without greater empathy.

JK: Why do you think horror continues to enjoy popularity, both as a genre, in literature, cinema, television and games, and in terms of resonance and meaning, with audiences?

Mark Yohalem: There is the Lovecraft cliché that fear [of the unknown] is the oldest and strongest emotion. I don't know if that's true, but I think horror will always be with us. The Greeks taught that our very efforts to impose control over the things we fear simply hastens us toward our doom. All of human history is an effort to control primordial horrors, but our "war to end all wars" yielded a hecatomb like no other, our green revolution against famine created the specter of an unnaturally brittle food supply, and our miracle cures have bred prodigiously resistant diseases. I truly believe our striving is noble and has generally made the world a better place, but the lesson here is that we cannot conquer the things we fear; they are protean and eternal; hubris summons nemesis. So we will never be free of these terrors.

That means we need horror. Horror is a way of manifesting our primordial dreads (including the fear of powerlessness and loss of control) in forms that we can wrestle with. Just as nightmares help us process fears while we're asleep, horror helps us process those fears while we're awake. As long as life is a chaotic mess that resolves only in death, we will turn to horror to help us survive.

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Jeffery Klaehn holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Amsterdam and a PhD in Sociology from the University of Strathclyde. His interviews in the field of Comics Studies have been published with the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, Studies in Comics, ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies,* and the *International Journal of Comic Art.* His research interests include social theory, media, power, public communication, comics, art, pop culture, the creative industries, writing, storytelling, and digital games. He has edited and co-edited seven books, and his work has been published with the *Creative Industries Journal, First Person Scholar, Journalism Studies, Media Theory*, and other journals. He resides in Canada.

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